



The City of Houston Health Department appreciates the opportunity to provide comments regarding reentry programs for inmates returning to the City of Houston through the City of Houston Community Reentry Network Program (CRNP). As the director of a local health department (LHD) in Texas and as the Co-Chair of the Houston-Harris County Reentry Workgroup, I am particularly focused on reducing barriers to successful reentry of those returning to this community.

Recent data has consistently shown that more than 12,000 individuals return to the Houston area after a period of incarceration in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). With the statewide overall recidivism rate over the last 10 years holding steady between 20.3 and 21.4 percent, the City of Houston CRNP has most recently experienced a programmatic annual recidivism rate of 7.8%.

Current Successful TDCJ Measures

During the 84th Legislature, state policymakers continued to demonstrate commitment to enhancing both state and local level reentry practices. Policy initiatives enhanced the development of a comprehensive reentry process designed to eliminate reentry barriers and achieve the goals of increased public safety and reduced recidivism. Measures taken by the Legislature enable TDCJ to further implement evidence-based practices to assess criminogenic risks and needs and apply that information to develop effective individualized plans for return to the community. As a result, there were numerous accomplishments, including:

- Continued engagements with the Reentry Task Force,
- Full implementation of the automated Texas Risk Assessment,
- The addition of 50 reentry transition coordinator positions, and
- The expansion of the Post Release Community Reentry Program
- Development and implementation of a Special Needs Reentry Program to supplement the existing continuity of care program
- Improved processes to increase the number of offenders approved for a Texas ID
- Automation to better identify eligible offenders for all phases of the Reentry Program; and
- Improved tracking and security accountability related to offender identification documents

The City of Houston CRNP has intentionally aligned its program services and supports with these effective initiatives. This alignment provides a smooth transition from incarceration to a direct connection to supportive case management and access to services ensuring that resources received from TDCJ support direct care for returning citizens.

The Houston Health Department established the Community Reentry Network Program in 2008 to address the varying needs of citizens returning to the Houston, Texas community. The program is appropriately housed at the Kashmere Multiservice Center, 4802 Lockwood Dr., Houston, TX 77026. It provides accessibility to neighborhoods in East Houston and the Eastex-Jensen areas. These neighborhoods attract and lodge the greatest number of TDCJ returning



citizens in the Houston area.

The mission of the CRNP is to work in partnership with the community to assess, plan and implement effective strategies to reduce recidivism, increase public health and safety and successfully assist and support justice impacted individuals in their transition into productive, contributing members of the Houston community. The core program components are behavioral health, accessibility to health care, case management, life skills classes and workforce development and support to aid in stabilizing each participant to become independent and self-sufficient. The program works closely with faith-based and community agencies to assist participants in meeting their needs.

As a result of the 84th Legislature appropriations, TDCJ entered into agreements with the City of Houston and the City of Dallas to create and operate pilot programs for local reentry services for offenders being released from TDCJ to the Houston and Dallas regions. Via this agreement, Houston has contracted with local entities providing reentry services including training and certification opportunities, employment referrals, housing, work supports, and other evidence-based training to move recently released individuals from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Institutional Division and State Jails to successful reintegration.

The City of Houston CRNP has effectively coupled evidence-based programming with wraparound supports to effectively partner with those recently released and offer pathways and opportunities to create new possibilities as they become productive citizens throughout the Houston community. Using these strategies CRNP has demonstrated an average annual recidivism rate of 7.8% compared to the state rate of 21.4%.

The CRNP offers the following recommendations to enhance program success and to ensure adequate resources and support for released offenders.

In reach/Outreach

It is imperative that programs are adequately funded to conduct outreach to touch those populations that are flat discharges within the community. These individuals lose contact with resources and supports upon discharge from institutional units. Justice impacted individuals often lack access and knowledge of community resources upon release. While more than 12,000 individuals are released to the Houston area annually, the City of Houston Community Reentry Network program touches 10 percent of this population.

As a result of CRNP's outreach efforts, the program engaged an individual who had been incarcerated for more than 40 years. He was incarcerated on the Ramsey Unit. He had no hope of his life ever turning around. He was eager to gain reintegration support to include intensive case management, evidence-based classes, workforce development support and basic needs assistance. As a result of his commitment to changing the trajectory of his future, he successfully completed the program. He is now working as an outreach specialist for the CRNP sharing with other returning citizens how much the program has helped him move forward upon his return to the Houston community.



Education/Training and Work

Education, training, and workforce development are all essential components of preparing individuals to successfully transition into the community. Many individuals entering the CRNP were either unemployed or underemployed while others lacked the requisite educational preparation to enter the workforce prior to becoming incarcerated. To resolve these barriers, the program developed partnerships with providers throughout the community who prioritized creating opportunities to support justice impacted individuals obtain the skills, certifications, education and/or chances they needed to create brighter futures for themselves and their families.

The program engaged an individual seeking employment opportunity after being incarcerated for more than 25 years. He enrolled in the program two weeks after release from the Hamilton Unit. His goal was to take full advantage of the program resources including intensive case management, evidence-based programming, and workforce development. He attended one of the CRNP job fairs. He was offered a temporary job on the spot. Since that time, he has obtained a full-time position with the same employer. He is grateful for the opportunity, and he shares the CRNP “blessing” with everyone he knows.

Another program participant was incarcerated for 3 years at the Gist Unit. He was committed to completing the program. He endured a 1 hour one way bus ride and a 2 hour walk to attend the program 4 days each week. He ultimately completed the program in 30 days. He is now employed full time at his first job, and he also has his first state of Texas driver’s license. He now seeks to get his tattoos removed so that he can fully leave his former life behind. He credits his success to his participation with the CRNP.

Behavioral Health

More than 35% of the individuals enrolling in the CRNP after a period of incarceration have a diagnosed mental health condition. Many others have identified symptomology related to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder. These individuals are often released to the community with a 7-day supply of medication and a list of other supportive resources that are often challenging to navigate upon return to the community setting. Based on the numerous challenges that the entire community now faces, CRNP has prioritized behavioral health needs of individuals seeking support from the program. The program takes a holistic approach. It works to support participants in stabilizing their behavioral health needs so that these individuals may also become well-functioning, contributing members of society.

A program participant enrolled upon release with a diagnosis of depression. While he did not have medication, program staff was able to immediately assist him with obtaining an appointment with the Harris Center New Start program within one week. He was committed to ensuring his mental health was stable and that he was able to actively participate in all of the program components that would support him in successful reintegration i.e., basic needs

supports, evidence based programs, and workforce development. He has now completed the program. He completed the requirements for the CDL permit and will soon begin the CDL program.

Housing

The justice impacted population faces many challenges as they transition back into the community. One of their greatest challenges is housing. While the program has referred participants to partners who provide housing resources and referrals, many formerly incarcerated individuals are still faced with housing inadequacy. The program seeks to partner with local community providers who offer supportive housing options. We recognize that housing is an essential need and basic for the survival of all people. The program seeks to support housing placement organizations with initial move in expenses for eligible justice impacted individuals. The goal is to provide support as individuals build their own capacity to positively engagement in the community.

Basic Needs

The CRNP partners with local community organizations to provide transportation, food, and clothing. These partners have been instrumental in creating avenues for support where there have historically been gaps in services for the justice impacted community. Many formerly incarcerated individuals live in communities that are food deserts. These partners provide whole, fresh foods that are both nutritional and free. Other partners offer clothing resources that are appropriate for the workplace and casual settings. Many program participants would otherwise be unable to purchase these items and lack what they need for various settings. One of the most valuable resources offered to program participants is transportation assistance. While Houston is fortunate to have mass, public transit, many of the employment opportunities available to the program participants are outside of the boundaries of the public transportation system. Additionally, the participants often time lack personal transportation and support each other with their transportation needs until they can provide their own means of transportation.

One participant enrolled in the program upon release from incarceration was determined to become a success story. She attended the program and was fully engaged. She took full advantage of the evidence-based classes and the workforce development components. She also received food and transportation support. Ultimately, she became employed by the program as an outreach specialist. She is committed to helping others in that she still gives back to women in prison and on her same reentry journey by sharing her story and speaking at various support groups. She believes in and demonstrates through her personal story the capacity of individuals to change.

Another participant recently released from Gist State Jail enrolled in the CRNP upon release. He was facing serious health challenges. Additionally, he needed food and clothing. He was fortunate to receive food from one of CRNP's partners and spend his first Thanksgiving with his family. They were thankful for the resources provided to them to enjoy this time with their loved one. He is looking forward to graduating from the program with his family attending and cheering him on.





The program continues to support the ever-growing needs of returning citizens to the Greater Houston community. As a public health entity, we have been afforded a unique opportunity to offer an extensive host of services and supports to the reentry clientele seeking assistance. As public health priorities continue to evolve, the Houston Health Department recognizes the indelible impact incarceration has on public health. Our priority as it relates to reentry is to preserve, support and enhance what is currently in place, including infrastructure, activities, staffing, resources, and supports. Additional support for community-based reentry programs enables HHD and faith and community-based partners to increase service capacity to offer support for successful reintegration, provide targeted in-reach and outreach, and further examine and enhance the effectiveness of the scope of our current implementation

While CRNP's interventions have proven successful and have had positive outcomes as evidenced by the real-life participants' experiences referenced in this document, given additional resources the positive impact and outcomes would allow many more returning citizens to benefit from these opportunities and would certainly increase public health and safety for our communities and the City as a whole!

If you have further questions, please feel free to email me at Stephen.Williams@houstontx.gov or by phone at 832-393-5001.

The Committee's consideration of this matter is greatly appreciated.

Respectfully,

DocuSigned by:

Stephen Williams

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Director

Cc: Members of the House Interim Committee on Criminal Justice Reform

